

The Girl Next Door by Kamije Celeek

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Friendship, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., Mike W.

Pairings: Mike W./Eleven/Jane H.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2019-03-25 12:29:53

Updated: 2019-05-01 20:52:42

Packaged: 2019-12-12 20:39:48

Rating: T

Chapters: 7

Words: 13,482

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Most people didn't meet their soulmate at the age of four. Most people didn't have that soulmate move in next door and be their best friend. Most people's soulmates weren't superheros who could throw bullies off you in an instant. But Mike Wheeler wasn't most people.

1. The Moms Meet

Terry Ives let out a gasp as she slumped against the wall in town.

I did it, I saved Jane, we're out, Brenner can't hurt her anymore.

There were still signs of the Lab on her daughter—the tattooed *011*, for instance, and the way she didn't respond to her actual name. She only replied to Eleven and that broke Terry's heart more than anything. It was close to dark now, and her four-year-old was sleepily rubbing her eyes. They needed someplace to stay, someplace safe, but Terry was a stranger in Hawkins and her car had been abandoned at the Lab and she didn't have any money with her. All she had was a gun and her baby girl. Not the *best* plan in the world, but she had her daughter. That was what mattered.

She picked up Jane and carried her, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible and failing. A woman about her age came out of the grocery store and blinked at the sight, making Terry shrink away from her before the woman's eyes widened and she opened her mouth.

"No, sorry. It's just... who are you?"

"I'm Terry. This is my daughter, Jane."

"Eleven," Jane corrected in a sleepy voice, burying her face in her mother's shoulder.

"I'm Karen. What are you doing out here?" Terry's throat dried and she couldn't speak. "Oh my... sorry again. You're not from here, are you?"

"No. I'm from Indianapolis but my car was stolen and I... I just need a place for the night."

Karen smiled.

"Well, we have an extra room at my house and I have a son about your daughter's age. I'm sure that you can stay with us until you find a way back home."

"Thank you. Thank you so much."

Terry followed Karen to a station wagon that already had a car-seat strapped into the back—probably for her son—and buckled the almost-asleep Jane into it before sliding into the front. As Karen pulled out of the parking lot, a Hawkins Power and Light van slid by and Terry stiffened at the sight of Dr. Martin Brenner in the front seat. But he didn't see her, instead snapping at the driver of the van to move and Terry felt her worries melting away.

"I have an eight-year-old at home, too," Karen said. "I'm sure Jane will get along with her and Michael just fine."

She pulled into the driveway of an idyllic-looking suburban house, complete with an American flag and sprinklers that were already watering the lawn for the night. Terry felt an odd sense of peace as she carried Jane out of the car and into the house after Karen unlocked the door. The whole house was quiet and Terry caught sight of family photos: an eight-year old girl with blue eyes and curly brown hair and a little boy with black hair and freckles jumped out at her. They were so close, reminding her of herself and Becky.

Oh, God, Becky. I have to call her.

"Come with me." Karen led Terry upstairs and to a guest bedroom, where Terry laid Jane on the bed (the little girl now asleep) and went back downstairs.

"Could I use your phone?"

"Of course."

Terry dialed the familiar number of her home with Becky in Indianapolis, then waited for it to ring.

"Hello?"

"Becky, it's me."

"Terry! Where are you?"

"Hawkins. I... I got her back, Becky. I got my Janey back." Terry

completely forgot she was in Karen's house and was currently being overheard by the woman.

"Y-you're serious?"

"We're staying somewhere in Hawkins, but I'm fine. I'll try to find a way home."

"Terry, no. Please, don't move. I'll come pick you up."

"All right. See you tomorrow."

Click.

"What do you mean, you got her back?" Karen asked. Terry realized that she'd been listening.

"It's a long story, and it's not going to paint me in the best light, but..."

And Terry told Karen about the Lab, about MK-Ultra, about Brenner cutting her daughter out of her and faking the baby's death. Karen listened, her jaw dropping and her eyes widening at everything Terry was saying. As a mother herself, she couldn't *imagine* the pain Terry had gone through, trying to bring her daughter home and everyone calling her crazy for believing her daughter was alive. It made her sick to her stomach and she knew that she wasn't going to let the pair be separated again. In her mind, she thought of what she would do if somebody tried to take Mike or Nancy, and that's what sealed her determination.

Never again.

Mike yawned as he woke up on his own. His mom hadn't come to get him, which meant that she was letting him sleep longer today. But he could hear her downstairs and she was talking to somebody. He slid out of bed and walked down the hall before noticing that the guest room door was slightly open. Curiosity got the better of him and he opened it more to see a little girl with blonde hair asleep in the guest bed. Her face was peaceful and pretty, like a princess in a movie, and he tiptoed in to see her closer. Almost as if she could sense him, her

eyes fluttered open, big and lively and caramel brown.

"Who are you?" she mumbled.

"I'm Mike. Who are you?"

"Eleven."

"That's weird. My sister's eight—" Eleven shook her head as she sat up.

"My sister is Eight." She held out her wrist and showed him the number. "I'm Eleven. My sister's Eight."

Mike's eyes widened. He'd never seen a kid with a tattoo before, much less a kid his own age.

"Eleven's a weird name."

"Mike's a weird name." She puffed out her cheeks and he smiled.

"Maybe we can call you El."

"My mama calls me Jane."

"Mine calls me Michael."

"Oh." El slid her legs over the side of the bed and almost tumbled to the floor, not being used to so high a sleeping space. Mike caught her before she could hurt herself and a feeling of warm affection spread through his body. He wanted to hug El and keep her safe for some reason.

"My mommy's downstairs. Come on and we'll have some breakfast."

El nodded and he took her hand, leading her down the stairs and using his other hand to hold the railing so he wouldn't fall. His mom always told him to do that, but El didn't seem to know. But she mirrored him, anyway, letting go of his hand as she slipped on the carpet and grabbed the railing with that hand to steady herself. She and Mike made it into the kitchen, where their respective mothers were talking. As if on instinct, the two women looked to see their

children standing there.

"Oh, Michael!" gasped Karen. "I see you've met Jane. She and her mother are going to stay with us for a few days."

"Her name's Eleven. But I call her El."

Terry felt happy that this boy seemed to see her daughter as a friend already. He wouldn't let the Lab take her again. Karen set two plates of Eggos on the table and Mike and El sat down next to each other. Mike showed her how to use a fork and pour syrup, which the little girl picked up rather quickly. Wordlessly, Karen left the room and came back with an instant camera, which she used to take a picture of the children. Mike was too busy talking to El in the way only toddlers can talk to each other to notice his mother had done it.

What was obvious was that they weren't going to be able to separate the two...

Over the next six months, Terry was pulled into her case of suing Hawkins Lab and El was asked to tell the people what had been done to her within its walls. Other children were found inside, older children who told of being kidnapped and experimented on, of being shocked and tortured, of missing their parents and wanting to go home. Brenner was thrown into federal prison for life, and the children were all sent to their families. El stayed with her mother, who used the settlement from the court case to buy the house next door to the Wheelers when it went up for sale. She and Karen were good friends now, and Mike and El were inseparable, so needless to say, they spent a lot of time together.

"You know, I bet they'll date when they're older," Karen commented to Terry as they watched the two play in the backyard.

"I have to agree with you," Terry laughed. "I'm glad Jane—I mean, El—has made such a good friend. They'll have each other when they start kindergarten, at least."

"Mama!" called El, running up with Mike following her. "Mrs. Wheeler! Can Mike and me build a fort?"

"Of course you can!" Karen said, smiling. "Build it in the basement and you two can sleep in there tonight during your sleepover!"

"Yay! Come on, Mike!"

The two disappeared into the house and Karen let out a sigh of contentment.

"Thank you, Karen." She looked at Terry. "Thank you for everything you've done for me and for El. I... I wouldn't be here without you."

"You're welcome. Now, how about we go find the kids some blankets for their fort?"

Okay, this story is kind of weird. This is a 'Terry doesn't get electro-shocked and escapes the Lab with El and ends up friends with Karen Wheeler so El and Mike are best friends from the age of four' AU.

Or just a 'Terry and El are happy' AU.

Most of these—of the few I've found—usually involve Terry living in Indianapolis and El meeting Mike much later. Me no want that; I want cute four-year-old best friends Mike and El, please.

Anyway, I want to do a lot of cute little-kid stuff for them before we move on to the older-kid romance.

So long and thanks for all the fish!

2. The Beginnings of Friendship

El looked at the blanket fort with wide eyes.

It was amazing, to say the least. They'd used the table in the basement and a few chairs as supports and Mike's mama had even brought some big quilts from the closet to use. As a bonus, she and El's mama had hung Christmas lights around it, making it bright and cheery. Mike was grabbing some toys to bring into the fort with them, including El's bear.

"Come on, El!" he encouraged. She dove in and nestled next to him. Their mothers came in, Karen carrying her camera and looking absolutely adoring at the children.

"Aren't you two just the *cutest*?!" she cooed, holding up the Polaroid. El threw her arms around Mike and he hugged her back, letting his mother take the picture.

"Well, I've got to head to work," Terry sighed, checking her watch. "I'll be back to pick you up tomorrow, Ellie. Okay?"

"Okay, Mama!"

She kissed her daughter on the cheek and then headed up the basement stairs, shortly followed by Karen. Mike and El were left alone in the basement.

"Hey, wanna see something cool?" El asked Mike.

"Yeah?"

She focused her gaze on her teddy bear and it began to rise from the quilt. Mike's eyes widened, his jaw dropping as the bear floated over to him and dropped into his lap.

"You made the bear float!" he gasped.

"Uh-huh. Papa used to have me do stuff like that all the time."

"Why did your mama make you leave him?"

"It was a bad place, she said. And she wanted me to live with her. I like her more than Papa, anyway. And I like you more than Papa, too, and I wouldn't have met you if I was there. But Mama says I shouldn't tell everybody, so you have to keep it a secret, okay?"

"I will. Could you make other stuff float?"

"Maybe!" She brought the bear back over to her and then Mike noticed that a small drop of blood was coming out of her nose.

"Your nose is bleeding!" El touched the blood and frowned.

"It happens sometimes. Mama gets them, too."

"I'll get you a tissue!" Mike ran upstairs and came back with a whole box. "Here."

"Thank you." She wiped the blood away and picked up her bear. "Can you do that stuff?"

"Me? No way. I'm not cool like you."

"I'm not cool."

"You're my best friend. That's why you're cool."

"Then you are, too!" She smiled broadly, then started tickling him.

"Agh! El!" He started tickling her back and before long, they were lying on the quilt, laughing and having a good time.

"Are you two having fun without me?" a voice said from the stairs. They sat up and saw Nancy, who was holding some books.

"No..." El giggled.

"Oh, yes, you are! Scoot over!" The two four-year-olds made room for their eight-year-old counterpart and she set down the books. "What kind of story do you two want?"

"A wizard princess and a brave knight!" Mike suggested.

"A *wizard* princess? Never heard that one before!"

"El's a wizard princess and I'm her brave knight!"

"Okay, then!" Nancy opened one of her books (none of her stories had wizard princesses; the toddlers couldn't read) and cleared her throat. "Once upon a time, there was a brave knight who wanted nothing more than to be the greatest hero ever. He traveled the land and tried to find a quest that would let him become that hero. One day, he was in a forest that seemed to have no end and was suddenly surrounded by trolls. He called out desperately for somebody to save him. A beautiful maiden appeared and helped him drive off the trolls with her magic. From that day forward, they were the best of friends."

She noted that Mike and El were hanging on to every word.

"Then, the magical maiden had to go home to her mother, because she was the princess of a kingdom called Labrynnna. The knight went with her, but the princess's wicked stepfather wouldn't let him inside the castle. Instead, he had games held to decide who would marry the princess and be the next king. Of course the princess refused to let her friend be kept away, so she snuck him into the castle and he entered the games because he'd fallen in love with the princess. Most of the other knights who'd joined didn't even care about the princess. They just wanted to be king.

"As the games went on, it became clear that the princess's knight was the best of them all. He kept winning and the princess was happy because she'd fallen in love with him, too. The wicked stepfather, however, was jealous and he cast an evil spell on the princess to make her fall into a deep sleep. But the knight wasn't willing to let his true love go so easily. He won the games and then declared to the queen that he would break the spell on the princess no matter what."

"What does 'true love' mean?" El asked.

"It means... well, it means that you love a person more than anything else, and you'll always be together, no matter what."

"Like me and Mike!" Mike nodded and Nancy had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from squealing over how cute it was.

"Keep going!" Mike urged his sister.

"All right. So the knight set off on his quest to break the spell. He traveled far and wide, searching for the cure. Along the way, he slayed dragons and rescued other princesses, but he didn't marry them because he knew his princess would be waiting. And she was the only one he'd ever love. Eventually, he met an old old woman, who told him the cure to the spell that the wicked king had cast on his stepdaughter: true love's kiss.

"With the cure in his mind, the knight rode as fast as he could back to Labrynnna, where the princess was locked in a tower. The wicked king had gone as far as making it impossible for her to escape with magic. But the queen helped the knight and gave him the key, which let him enter the room where the princess lay sleeping. He crossed the room to her bed and leaned over her, pressing his lips to hers and *WHOOSH!* The spell was broken. They were married and the wicked king was forced to become a stable-boy instead of a king. And everybody but him lived happily ever after. The end."

El clapped her hands and hugged Nancy tightly, a sort of thank-you for the story.

"So a true love's kiss is when two people kiss and they'll be together forever and ever?"

"Yes, exactly." El then planted a kiss on Mike's cheek, making him turn pink.

"We'll have a kiss on the lips when we're bigger," she told him.

"Yeah. Like when we're as old as Nancy!"

Oh my gosh this is too cute.

A little while later, Karen called the three up for dinner. El sat next to Mike, as usual, and conversations involving Ted were stilted. After both the four-year-olds had been given a bath (Karen gave them a bath together; no sense in wasting water when they were this little and it was so damn cute), they were dressed in their pajamas and curled up together in the blanket fort. El's thumb was in her mouth and Mike had his arms around her. Karen couldn't resist; she took another picture.

She was going to save all of these in an album.

"Mike, are you ready to go?"

"Coming!"

He came flying downstairs, his dark hair flopping all over the place. It was his first day of kindergarten and he was excited to go to school. He and El were even in the same class, which Karen was grateful for. She stood by the door with her keys as Nancy made her way out of the kitchen. The three Wheelers headed out to the car. El and Terry came from next door and greeted the Wheelers before getting into the station wagon—El in the back with Nancy and Mike, Terry up front with Karen. They'd decided to take the kids to school together the first day.

When they got to the school, El and Mike said goodbye to their mothers and went inside, finding their classroom easily with Nancy's help. Their teacher, Miss Jennings, was a smiley lady with long dark red hair wearing bright colors. El liked her immediately, especially when Miss Jennings sat her and Mike next to each other. There was another blonde girl at their table named Jennifer, and another dark-haired boy named Troy. But while Jennifer smiled at them and introduced herself, Troy scowled at Mike and crossed his arms.

"You look like a frog."

"I do *not*!" Mike protested.

"So what if he does?" El scoffed. "Frogs are cute. We go catch them at the creek sometimes."

At recess, they played on the seesaw until Mike spotted a boy sitting on the swings by himself. The boy had reddish-brown hair and was as small as El. Mike got off the seesaw and walked over to the boy, El hopping along to follow him.

"Hi," Mike greeted the boy. "My name is Mike, and this is my best friend El."

"I'm Will," the boy replied.

"Do you wanna be friends?" Will looked from El to Mike and back again.

"Yes. I wanna be friends with you two."

And from that day forward, it was Mike, El, and Will against the rest of their class. El ended up showing Will her abilities, which he agreed to help keep secret, and Terry and Karen met Will's mother Joyce. For Karen, it was meeting an old friend, since she'd gone to high school with Joyce, and for Terry it was another sign that she and El were having a normal life. No more Lab, no more tests, and no more Brenner.

They were at the creek later that year, in spring, when all the frogs came out of hibernation and it was warm enough to wear shorts and T-shirts. Nancy was with them, along with Will's older brother Jonathan and Nancy's best friend Barbara. The older kids were there to make sure the younger ones didn't fall in or hurt themselves.

"I got one!" El announced, holding up a frog that squirmed in her grasp.

"Maybe it's your prince, Ellie!" Nancy called.

"Mike's my prince!"

The dark-haired boy grinned, showing off the gap where one of his front teeth had been. El let the frog go and started walking along the bank, looking for another one. Will stood by Barbara, who showed him the best ways to make sure a frog didn't get squished when you caught it. Jonathan was taking pictures with Karen's Polaroid camera.

Then a tiny noise caught El's attention.

She headed down the creek to where there was a small and pointless footbridge. A sack was caught on some reeds, and the sack was wiggling. El picked up the sack and opened it to find a tiny golden-furred kitten. It mewed pitifully and her five-year-old heart melted.

"You're coming home with me, little one," she told the kitten, cradling it in her arms and abandoning the sack. The kitten instantly calmed

and curled up, purring. She made her way back to the others and Nancy immediately caught sight of the kitten.

"Oh my goodness, where did you find that?"

"I found it by the bridge. Somebody left it there and I'm gonna keep it."

"What's its name?" Mike asked. Will and Barbara came over, too.

"I'm gonna call it Eggo. Because it's the same color as an Eggo."

Eggo mewed and wriggled in El's arms, revealing that its eyes were the same color as maple syrup. Further cementing the name in the five-year-old girl's mind. The kids all headed back to the Wheelers, where Karen insisted upon taking Eggo to the vet to make sure the kitten was in good health and to find out whether it was male or female.

And that was how Terry and El came to have El's first pet.

Okay, so these first couple chapters won't really follow a plot. Instead, they'll be what I call 'snapshot chapters', where I have a few random events tossed together to make a chapter. Also, Karen is making sure to document Mike and El's friendship because it's so stinking adorable.

Side-note: Holy crap! I did *not* expect this story to get as popular as it has. Before it was up for twenty-four hours, it had more comments and kudos and hits than any of my other stories have gotten in the same time frame! I'm glad you're all enjoying this!

Next time, the rest of the Party—sans Max—will arrive!

So long and thanks for all the fish!

3. The Party is Almost Complete

I have to address a common complaint in the reviews.

I know they talk far too complexly for four-and-five-year-olds. However, I would like to state that I am a Girl Scout leader for five-year-olds, all of whom have complex speech. As for El being well-spoken, there are things called 'critical periods' in child development. The critical period for language is seven years old. You should really look into this yourself, actually, but just know that this is the kind of stuff I'm going to school for as an early childhood education major.

Let's get to the cuteness you all came here for!

"Eggo!"

El crouched under one of the bushes in front of the Ives house.

"Here, kitty kitty!" called Mike.

Eggo had been El's cat for all of three months, and now it was summertime. And that cat had decided to run off the day before, hence why they were searching for her.

"What if she never comes back?" whimpered El, looking sad.

"She'll come back! Mommy says cats like to go where their food bowl is, and Eggo's food bowl is in your kitchen!"

El nodded, sniffing, and Mike gave her a hug. Will wasn't with them that day; he was spending the day with his dad, so they were looking for Eggo by themselves.

"Be careful, Lucas!"

"I know, Mommy!"

The two looked towards the house on the other side of El's, where a boy their age was coming outside. A new family had moved in a

couple days earlier, according to Terry, and they had a son who she thought El and Mike and Will might get along with. But when El had tried to introduce herself, the new boy had rebuffed her because she was a girl. As a result, Mike refused to be friends with the boy who refused to accept his best one. That didn't stop Lucas from trying to be friends with Mike, though, and El had told Mike it was fine.

"Maybe Lucas can help us find Eggo?" she suggested to Mike.

"He's a meanie. He says you're no good to be friends with because you're a girl."

"So?" El shrugged. "Lots of boys think girls aren't any good. And girls think the same thing about boys. You and me and Will are just different."

"Are you going to ask him?"

"You should do it. He won't let me talk to him."

"Okay."

Mike headed across to the yard, where Lucas was playing with some of his toys.

"Hi, Lucas," he greeted the boy. Lucas looked up.

"Why are you talking to me? I thought you didn't like me because I don't play with girls."

"Well... El's cat ran off and we're trying to find her, so El asked if I would ask you to help us look."

"What's the cat's name?"

"Eggo. Like the waffle. Because she's the same color as an Eggo."

Lucas set down his toys and sighed.

"Okay, I'll help. And... maybe you and me can be friends?"

"Not if you're gonna be mean to El. She's my best friend."

"Fine." They shook on it and then Lucas went over with Mike back to El. "Hi. Sorry I was mean to you."

"It's okay." She turned and headed to the Wheeler house. "Eggo! Come home!"

Lucas turned back towards his own house just in time to see a golden-yellow blur dart out from under the front bushes. He ran towards it and scooped up a golden-yellow cat with syrup-brown eyes. The cat yowled, getting El's attention.

"You found her!" she squealed, taking the cat from Lucas. Eggo immediately calmed in El's arms, as usual, and El put her back in the house. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Can... can I play with you guys?"

"Sure! As long as you promise to be nice!"

"I promise."

Lucas then joined their little group, becoming the fourth member of a pretty solid little band. Mike was their leader, Lucas pretty much became the second-in-command, El was the toughest of the four, and Will was the heart. But somehow, they didn't quite feel complete as a 'party', as Nancy put it. Something was missing.

That something turned up one day during fourth grade.

"Everyone, this is Dustin Henderson," Ms. Jamison stated, her hand on the shoulder of a boy with curly hair that stuck out from under his hat. "I hope you all make him feel welcome at Hawkins Elementary. Dustin, why don't you go sit next to Jane? Jane, sweetie, raise your hand for Dustin!"

El raised her hand and Dustin took the seat next to her. Smiling, she held out her hand to him.

"It's nice to meet you," she told him. "I'm Jane, but everyone except Ms. Jamison calls me El."

He accepted her handshake, smiling in a way that didn't show his teeth. She frowned.

"Why are you smiling like that?"

"Cause my teeth are messed up..." he mumbled.

"How are they messed up?" He opened his mouth to reveal some of his teeth weren't there.

"I didn't want you to make fun of me." She furrowed her brow, then smiled.

"Come sit with me at lunch! We can talk more then."

Dustin followed her to lunch, where they sat at a table by themselves. He noticed that despite her being so nice, she didn't really have any friends.

"Where are your friends?"

"They're all in Mr. Simmons's class. And they eat before us. You can meet them at recess, though." She tilted her head. "What's up with your teeth, anyway?"

"It's called cleidocranial dysplasia. Basically, my bone growth is delayed. I got made fun of a lot where I lived before because of my teeth. And because I don't have a collarbone." Her eyes widened.

"There's no way! Prove it!"

Dustin sighed and stretched his arms, popping his shoulders forward in a way that El had never seen any human do before. Her jaw dropped.

"That's so *cool*!"

"You don't think it's weird?" She showed him her left arm and tugged down the charm bracelet that covered her tattoo.

"I'm a nine-year-old with a tattoo. I can deal with weird."

"Is that *real*?"

"Yep."

"Your mom let you get it?"

"Nope. My papa put it on me when I was too little to remember. But it's why people call me El—it's short for Eleven. My best friend gave me the name El."

"Cool." He pulled a Three Musketeers out of his lunch bag and opened it before breaking it in half. "Want some?"

"Sure! I like Three Musketeers." Dustin's eyes widened. "What?"

"Please be my friend forever. Nobody else I've ever met likes nougat." El started giggling.

"Of course I'll be your friend! But you'll have to meet my other friends, too."

True to her word, El brought Dustin over to the group at recess. Mike eyed the new addition with suspicion.

"Who's this?" he asked.

"This is Dustin. He just moved here and he's really cool!"

"You think I'm cool?" Dustin gasped.

"Yeah!"

"What, does he like Three Musketeers?" Lucas inquired jokingly.

"Yes! He does!" El crossed her arms and Lucas held up his hands in surrender.

"Okay, fine."

"And he doesn't have a collarbone."

"No way!" Dustin showed the other three boys what he'd shown El earlier, and their reactions were the same—amazed and not as

disgusted as Dustin was used to. In fact, they seemed in awe of this ability.

And that was how Dustin came to join them.

However, not long after, something shifted for the Party (as they'd taken to calling themselves when they got into Dungeons & Dragons). And this something wasn't a good shift. The shift came in the form of Troy Harrington becoming more aggressive in his bullying of the four boys. He never bothered El, though, mostly because people would really notice if he was picking on a girl. The boys were fair game to him and his buddy, James. But El didn't know how bad it was until they were in seventh grade and she came outside just in time to see Troy trip Mike and make him hit his chin on a rock.

"Mike!" she shrieked, running over. Troy looked startled at her sudden appearance and ran off, laughing about how 'lame' Mike and his friends were.

"El, I'm fine," he insisted as she dug into her backpack and pulled out a tissue.

"You're *bleeding*. That's *not* 'fine', Michael."

"And I thought *Will* was our healer," chuckled Dustin.

"You need to put a Band-Aid on it. It's not going to heal otherwise." She tilted her head. "How long has he been doing shit like that?"

"Since fifth grade," Mike answered honestly, never being able to lie to his oldest friend.

"How come I haven't noticed?"

"Because he never makes me bleed like this and he never does it when you're around."

"Well, then, the solution is that I'll always have to be around."

"El, you don't have to—"

"Ah! No buts. I'm sticking to you like syrup to an Eggo. Or those stupid little burr things to Eggo's fur. You're stuck with me."

Mike didn't say it out loud, but he was pretty sure that he'd been stuck with El since the day they met. They'd never really been apart since, and the few times they'd been separated (like when he went to visit his grandparents in Louisiana) had been pretty miserable. Granted, he didn't really *remember* the day they met, but still—they'd been together so long that being without her felt *wrong* somehow.

El helped Mike to his feet.

"Thanks."

"Hey, what are best friends for?" She smiled and Mike felt his heart pound a little.

What the hell...?

Again, a 'snapshot' chapter. Next time we'll be getting a little more serious.

So long and thanks for all the fish!

4. Dad Comes Home

CHAPTER WAS NOT PLANNED

HOWEVER, I JUST READ *SUSPICIOUS MINDS* AND I NEED TO GIVE TERRY A HAPPY ENDING

SPOILERS FOR THE STRANGER THINGS NOVEL

July 4, 1980. Hawkins, Indiana

It was a beautiful day in Hawkins, the perfect day to celebrate the birth of America. The sun was shining and the Party and their families were gathering at the Wheelers for just such a celebration. The kids had headed off towards Mirkwood for the day, though, to spend some time at the creek. El was riding tandem with Mike since her bike had a flat—something that Dustin and Lucas teased him about until he bit out for them to shut up and El started giggling. Eventually, they went back to the house and ate dinner.

"You know," commented Dustin to El. "You never talk about your dad. What's he like?"

"No idea. Mama never talks about him, either, and I never met him. Whenever I ask, she gets a sad look on her face and goes up to her room for a while."

"Oh."

"All I know is what Aunt Becky's told me, and that's... he and Mama were really in love and he was a soldier in the war."

"He must've gotten killed," Lucas stated bluntly. "And your mom misses him, which is why she gets all depressed when you talk about him."

"Maybe... but maybe she doesn't know. And that makes it bad, too."

"Is your aunt coming?" inquired Will.

"I think so. But she'll be here later. It's a long drive from Indianapolis."

"Kids!" called Terry. "I've got sparklers for you!"

El was the first up, running over to her mother with the boys close behind as Terry handed a lit sparkler to the lone girl of the Party. Mike smiled as he watched his oldest friend stare at the sparkler with... well, a sparkle in her eyes.

She's so pretty...

He suddenly had an image of a four-year-old El sleeping in the guest bed, looking like a princess. Her hair was much lighter in the mental picture; blonde rather than the brown it had darkened to over the years they'd been friends. And without the curls he'd come to appreciate, too.

And that brought to mind Dustin's question about El's father. Mike knew he had traits from both his parents and that most kids did. El had Terry's curls and the same eye shape and the same button nose. But the brown eyes, the darker hair, the paler skin—all of that must've come from El's dad, whoever he was. She mentioned a 'Papa' in the past, but he seemed more like... a jailer. Not to mention Terry seemed to be very angry at whoever that 'Papa' was. Constantly. Consistently. And his mom knew who 'Papa' was, too, based on the fact that she snapped at Mike for asking questions about the man.

I wonder if El's dad would like her being friends with boys.

"I don't know, Becky—this doesn't seem like the best way to go back to her."

"You've been apart for ten *years*. For God's sake, you have a *child* together."

"But I've never *met* Jane. How will I know how to be her father? What if she thinks I'm a deadbeat?"

"Jane won't think that, trust me." Becky turned her eyes back to the road. "She reminds me a lot of you and Terry, to be honest—smart

with a lot of attitude and stubborn as hell."

Andrew sighed as he saw the familiar sign that he hadn't seen since college.

Welcome to Hawkins.

"I guess better late than never. I hope... I hope that Terry will at least let me *try*."

"She will. Or I'll just sneak Jane out to you so you can spend time with her."

"Thanks, Becky."

"Not a problem."

They passed through a few idyllic-looking areas—the kind of places Andrew thought Terry had *sworn* she would never live in. Time really did change things.

For ten years, he'd been separated from Terry Ives. The love of his life, his soulmate, his one person. And that separation hurt. First, it had been the war that tore them apart when he got drafted. Then he'd been captured and put into a POW camp where he was tortured on a semi-daily basis. After that came his rescue and rehabilitation, where he'd spent three years recuperating and readjusting to life on the outside. Finally, he'd been unable to find Terry for some reason and ended up finishing his college education without her, resigning himself to the fact that he'd never see her again and she'd likely moved on.

He'd run into Becky by complete chance.

She'd been furious, of course, that he hadn't contacted Terry... but she quickly sobered once she realized he'd had no way to do so. They'd talked and she'd explained that his one-and-only was living in Hawkins—the very town where she'd been experimented on in that lab out in the woods. Which was now shut down, much to Andrew's delight. Her reasoning for moving to Hawkins was a mystery until Becky dropped the bomb.

He and Terry had a daughter.

A beautiful little girl named Jane who went by the name El for some reason Becky refused to explain.

And now? Now he was going to meet his daughter for the first time. Now he was going to reunite with Terry (which would hopefully end well and not with her punching him, which he wouldn't put past her). Now he was going to have a second chance at making a real life with Terry and Jane, a life where they'd be happy together and he could watch his daughter become a teenager and do everything normal children did. After all, his little girl was only nine years old.

"Maple Street," stated Becky. "The home of Terry and Jane Ives for the past five years. And two of Jane's friends, too."

She began to slow down approaching a house with a Fourth of July celebration going on. Andrew scanned the faces of those gathered and immediately spotted Terry standing next to a woman who was heavily pregnant. He also saw a little girl with brown curls holding a sparkler and talking animatedly to a boy with dark hair and freckles.

"Ready, Andrew?" Becky asked once she'd parked the car next door to the one with the celebration.

"Ready as I'll ever be. But... could you go talk to Terry first? I'm... um..."

"Not as ready as you thought?"

"That." Becky sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Fine. I'm heading over."

El glanced over as she watched her aunt Becky get out of her car. She grinned.

"Aunt Becky! Look what Mama gave me!" she called.

"That's great, Janey!"

She rolled her eyes at the name 'Janey' (she hated her real name. El was better because Mike had given her the name El.) Becky was busy talking to Terry, anyway, so El turned her attention to her aunt's car. The passenger-side door opened and a man with brown hair wearing a white T-shirt and jeans got out. El didn't recognize him, but he felt... familiar... somehow.

"Who's that?" Dustin asked her.

"Dunno."

There was a *thunk*. El looked over to see that her mother had dropped her beer can.

"Oh my God..." Terry's voice was cracking with emotion as the mystery man made his way across the yard. "Oh my God—*Andrew*?!"

"Hey, Terry," he greeted her, chuckling nervously. She stumbled forwards, meeting him halfway as she stared at him.

"You're *alive*."

"Yep."

There was dead silence in the yard from all the adults gathered, while the kids just watched awkwardly. El scooted over to help her mother and grabbed her hand.

"Mama, who's this?"

Terry glanced down at her daughter and smiled.

"El, this is Andrew. He's... he's your father."

El's jaw dropped and the boys looked just as shocked. Andrew smiled down at her.

"He's... my father?"

"Yes." El stared up at Andrew.

"Where have you been?"

"I promise I'll explain when you're older, but just know that I've wanted to get back to you and your mother for a long time."

That seemed to satisfy El, who went back to join her friends while Terry gave Andrew a tense hug that plainly said she wanted to know where he'd been, too.

"DAD!"

Andrew jerked his head up as El came into the house supporting Mike, who had several cuts and bruises. Not to mention the nice shiner that was forming on his left eye.

"Ellie, what happened?!"

"Troy happened!"

"El, I'm fine," Mike insisted.

"You're not *fine*!" she snapped. "Why did Troy beat you up?"

"...I don't wanna talk about it."

"Ugh!"

"Ellie, I'll take it from here. You go grab the first aid kit and a bag of peas from the downstairs freezer."

"Okay..."

El ran out of the room and Andrew turned to Mike.

The kids were twelve now and Andrew could tell that Mike cared a lot about El. It was in such a way that Andrew could easily see them dating in a couple of years and it didn't bother him the way the thought of his daughter dating was apparently supposed to. It didn't hurt that El was just as protective of Mike, but they could both be extremely stubborn where the other was concerned. Which was likely why Mike was clamming up and refusing to tell El the reasoning behind Troy beating him up.

"You wanna tell me what that little asshole said?" Andrew asked.

"Are you gonna tell El?"

"Not unless you want me to." Mike swallowed.

"It was about her. He called her a..." He hesitated and Andrew put a hand on his shoulder.

"Mike, there's no language rule in this house. You can tell me what he said."

"He called her an uptight dyke bitch and said that the only reason she hung around me was because I made her feel stronger."

"What the fuck is wrong with him?"

"It's true, though... El's a lot tougher than me."

"Mike, everyone knows that. But nobody cares. Terry's tougher than I am."

"But you were in Vietnam!"

"I was. But Terry was fighting a human monster back here while I was fighting a figurative one overseas."

"Human monster?"

"I'll take you both there one day, where she was doing the fighting. But for now, let's get you cleaned up."

"We were out of peas, so I grabbed corn instead," El announced, coming into the room with a bag of frozen corn and the first aid kit.

"Thanks, sweetheart." Andrew took the corn and held it to Mike's eye.

"Mike, what did Troy say?"

"You don't wanna know."

A few days later, Mike and El found themselves in the backseat of

Andrew's car while he drove them past Mirkwood. Terry was in the passenger seat, looking more and more nervous the further they headed out of town. Wherever they were going, it was well past the Byers and the pumpkin farms where they went each October.

Finally, they came to a gate outside a large building that Mike didn't know and El only had a vague idea of in the back of her mind. Terry took a deep breath as she and Andrew got out of the car, signaling for the pair of twelve-year-olds to do the same.

"What is this place?" Mike asked.

"This is Hawkins National Laboratory," explained Terry. "This place is the reason I came to Hawkins. And why Andrew got drafted. And... El's tattoo."

El flipped over her left wrist, tracing over the *011* that had been inked there for as long as she could remember. Her tattoo came from this place? Weird...

"When I was pregnant with you, I was involved in a program here," continued Terry. "And because of that program... you were taken from me as soon as you were born. You inherited your abilities from me... but yours are stronger because of the program. And they wanted to keep you here and turn you into a human weapon. What made it worse was that they tried to convince me you'd been born dead but I knew you were alive because I heard you cry when you were born."

Mike gripped El's hand.

"You were four when I got you out of here. And I ran into town, where I met Karen and she gave us a place to stay for a few days. I wasn't planning to stay in Hawkins for long, but... you and Mike had an instant connection I couldn't bring myself to sever."

"So... El's abilities are because of this place?" Mike asked.

"Yes. They wanted to turn her into a human weapon to use against the Russians. At least, that's what they claimed. She was far from the only child in that program. There were ten others."

El shuddered and Mike gave her a gentle hug. Andrew smiled.

"It's great that you two support each other like this. And El, if you want... we can get your tattoo removed. We thought that you should know your story before you made that choice."

She glanced down at her arm and seemed thoughtful.

"I think I'll keep it. And maybe, when I'm older, I'll get something else tattooed over it."

After a few more minutes of quiet reflection, they returned to town.

Not the best chapter, but it's something.

But yes, this means that El's birth father is here and has a connection with her.

And that thing about El's birth father being drafted because of Brenner? One-hundred percent true. Brenner did it in an effort to control Terry which backfired.

Yay.

So long and thanks for all the fish!

5. Why He Loves Her

In hindsight, Mike should have seen it coming.

For one thing, El was the prettiest person he knew. He'd known that to be a fact since he was *four fucking years old*. It was the reason she had him wrapped around her little finger and could easily get him to do whatever she wanted if it would make her happy. Thankfully she never abused it in the way most people would and usually used that ability to get him to go along with her and the others to the arcade or something.

Another thing was that she was nice. Like, stupidly nice. Unless you were Stacey or Troy or one of their minions, it was impossible to hate her because of that. Mike often thought that if she weren't friends with him and the rest of the Party, she'd easily be one of the most popular girls in school. It made him feel guilty since she was bullied by Stacey's group for being friends with the 'losers'. Troy didn't touch her. He didn't want to risk it.

The last thing about El that everybody admired was the fact that she was easily the smartest girl in their class. She got the same grades as Mike and the others, but everyone thought that being pretty and smart were mutually exclusive, hence why it was shocking to much of the seventh grade. El also tutored some of her more-behind classmates, helping with whatever she could.

And that's what made her perfect, at least to him.

He could never imagine life without her. They'd been through so much over the years and he couldn't remember a time where she wasn't around—or, not clearly remember. He had vague memories of a time before El had come into his life, before she'd been freed from the lab by her mother, but all of it was faded and foggy at best. She was his best friend, his neighbor, his closest confidant...

And his first crush.

Yes, Mike Wheeler had succumbed to the cliché of falling for his childhood friend. But he couldn't help it. Really, he couldn't. She was

the one person who'd been there for him every step of the way, somebody who backed him up when things got bad with Troy or his parents were fighting. Her room was like his sanctuary when the yelling became too much and her parents never had a problem with him spending the night when that happened.

Maybe that was why he'd fallen for her—because she was the best thing in his life. No matter what happened, she was by his side and he'd do anything to protect her emotionally or physically. After all, she'd done the same for him. Like a couple days earlier, when she'd stopped Troy from punching him by making Mike's bully freeze and piss his pants in front of the whole school. It had been so awesome and Troy hadn't even considered that El had done it. And that was the moment Mike swore to himself he'd do anything to defend her.

Which was why he was in the woods with just Dustin.

Earlier that day, Troy had been making fun of Mike as usual and none of it had gotten under Mike's skin because he was used to the torment. That is, until Troy brought El into it and insulted her. The urge to defend her had welled up and Mike had challenged Troy to a fight before he could think twice about what he was saying. They'd agreed to meet in the woods for the fight and separated, which was when Mike had gone to Dustin for help. He couldn't ask Will, since Will and El were basically siblings and didn't hide shit from each other, and he couldn't ask Lucas because Lucas had something going on that afternoon. So it was 'Frogface' and 'Toothless'.

"Mike, are you sure this is a good idea?" Dustin asked.

"It's a terrible idea, but he can't get away with saying that kind of shit about El."

"No, I agree with that. There's gotta be a way besides getting your ass kicked to make that point. I know you have that whole 'white knight' thing going on where you need to conform to courtly love by defending your lady, but... dying won't do that."

"Well, thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Once you die, I'll tell her you died defending her—" Mike stopped

and stared at Dustin, wide-eyed.

"No! Do *not* tell her I went looking for a fight with Troy! If I don't die in this fight, she'll kill me for getting into it!"

"All right, all right! Jeez, asshole! You know you asked *me* to be your second in this duel."

"It's not a duel." They continued onward.

"Mike, fistfights are the modern equivalent of a duel. Face it—you're dueling for your lady's honor."

"She's not my lady."

"You've been making goo-goo eyes at her as long as I've known you. She's your lady. Like I said, courtly love and exaltation of the beloved lady."

"You're gonna have to explain all that to me one day."

"Can do."

"So, you actually showed up."

They saw Troy come out of the bushes, wearing a hooded jacket. James followed close behind.

"Yeah. You can't get away with saying that shit about El, you asshole!" Mike snapped.

"And what are you gonna do, Frogface? Beat me up? We all know you can't; that's why your freak girlfriend protects you."

Mike seethed with rage, then moved to punch Troy. Suddenly, Dustin jerked him back.

"Mike, he's got a knife!"

Sure enough, Troy had a switchblade. That was enough to get Mike and Dustin to run, but the two bullies chased after them. Going back to the bikes wasn't an option in their accelerated mental state and

they kept running towards the quarry. Unfortunately, Dustin got a cramp while they were near the top and James and Troy caught up with them, Troy grabbing Dustin and holding the switchblade to his gums.

"I think I should save Toothless here a trip to the dentist!" he sneered. "Help him lose the rest of his baby teeth."

"Let him go!" Mike snarled.

"Or what? You're gonna beat me up?"

"What do you want?"

"I wanna know how you did it."

"Did what?"

"I know you did some nerdy science shit to make me do that!"

"You mean *piss your pants*?"

"El has superpowers and she squeezed your tiny bladder with her mind!" Dustin gasped out. Troy looked annoyed.

"Fine. Then it's your turn, Wheeler. Wet yourself." Mike knit his eyebrows together in confusion and Troy gestured to the edge of the cliff. "Jump."

"No way!"

"Do it, or Toothless gets an early trip to the dentist!"

"Okay, hold on!" Mike held up his hands defensively. "Just *hold on*!"

He headed to the edge and hesitated. El's face came into his mind.

I'm sorry, El. I'm so stupid...

"Dentist's office opens in five!"

"Don't do it, Mike! I don't need my baby teeth!"

"Four!"

You're the most amazing person I know, El.

"Three!"

"Troy, this is messed up, dude!"

"Two!"

"MIIIIKE!"

"One!"

Mike stepped over the edge and dropped.

The three remaining boys froze at the top before running to look over the edge... and seeing Mike floating in midair.

"*Holy shit,*" Dustin whispered. Mike began to float back towards the top of the cliff and suddenly Dustin knew exactly what was going on.

Shit. Troy's about to get hurt.

The freckle-faced boy was dropped gently on the ground and he turned to stare up the quarry road. Dustin, Troy, and James followed his gaze to see El marching towards them, her eyes intense and focused and a drop of blood coming from her nose. Her overalls and pale pink shirt helped solidify the badass image in Dustin's mind. Troy and James looked a little afraid of her—tiny El Ives.

She tilted her chin up and James flew backward before she snapped her head to the left. Troy screamed as there was a cracking sound.

"My arm! She broke my arm!" he wailed.

"I *warned* you," she told him in a cold voice. "Leave me and my friends alone. Now go."

Troy and James ran for their lives and Dustin yelled after them.

"YEAH, YOU BETTER RUN! SHE'S OUR FRIEND AND SHE'S *CRAZY!* YOU COME BACK HERE AND SHE'LL KILL YOU! YOU HEAR THAT?!"

SHE'LL KILL YOU, YOU SONS OF BITCHES!"

El went over to Mike and crouched beside him, looking worried as she extended her hand.

"Are you okay?" she whispered. He nodded and accepted her hand as she helped him to his feet.

"Yeah. Thanks to you."

"What were you *thinking*?!" She smacked him on the back of the head.

"OW!"

"You *moron*! Why the *hell* would you jump off a cliff like that?! At this height, you'd reach terminally velocity and the surface tension of water would make it like *concrete*!"

God, why is she so adorable when she talks science?

"I'm sorry..." Mike mumbled before digging into his hoodie pocket and pulling out a tissue. "Here. You got a nosebleed again."

"Thanks." She wiped the blood away and narrowed her eyes. "Why were you even out here?"

Mike dug his toe into the gravel and Dustin walked up.

"Dustin, are *you* okay? Did he get you?"

"Nah. Didn't even nick me."

"Okay, so maybe *you* can tell me what the *hell* you two were doing out here. It's November, so don't tell me you were swimming..."

"I challenged Troy to a fight," Mike confessed. She stared at him in shock.

"Why... why did you do that?! He could've—he almost *killed* you!"

"Because he said some shit about *you* and I wasn't going to let him get away with it!" El blinked. "You're my best friend, and I'm sick of him being such an asshole about it because I care about you."

"In other words, you got into a duel for my honor."

"Yep!" Dustin confirmed. El was quiet for a minute.

"That's really sweet, but I'm still pissed at you."

"That's fair," Mike admitted with a shrug.

Then he felt her arms around him and wetness beginning to soak through his shirt.

"I can't lose you," she whimpered and he realized she was crying.

"I'm sorry..." He hugged her closely and Dustin joined in, third-wheeling but none of them cared.

They stood there like that for a minute, Mike feeling like an asshole for making El cry like that, and eventually they broke apart.

"On the bright side, you've gotten stronger," Dustin pointed out to El.

"Mama says that if I have these abilities, then I need to learn to control them in case of an emergency. So I go out to the junkyard to train sometimes. If I really concentrate, I can lift up that old school bus that's there."

"HOLY SHIT!"

"Is that why lifting me didn't hurt you?" Mike asked.

"Exactly."

"...wait, why were you even out here?"

"I was on my way to the Byers when I saw your bikes by the edge of the woods and I sensed something was wrong. I heard you screaming while you ran from Troy and I got here right when Mike jumped."

"El, you are the most amazing person I know."

"See, *this shit* is why she's better than any of the X-Men," Dustin snorted. "She's Jean Grey but ten times more fucking awesome."

El blushed.

"Let's go home," she insisted. "I'll make popcorn and we can watch *New Hope* and *Empire*. How does that sound?"

"Hell. Yes!"

Mike smiled like an idiot. He couldn't help it, not when El was who she was.

As he walked with her and Dustin towards where they'd left their bikes, though, his mind dipped into a dark place where it had often gone since finding out the truth about her past. What would've happened if Terry had failed to get El out of the lab? Would he have met her at all? Would she be the same person she was now? Or would she be a mindless drone?

Deep down, he knew that El would always be El. No matter what happened, they'd always meet. They'd always become friends. He'd always fall in love with her. And that was the way things were meant to be.

Now if only he had the balls to tell her...

WELL THAT WAS UNEXPECTED

I know you all weren't expecting an update so soon, but I started writing this and I got into a groove and this chapter happened way more quickly than I anticipated. Originally, this chapter was going to be El going on a date with someone else... then I realized that was stupid because *hello? She and Mike are soulmates forever and nothing will change that.* So instead it became Mike coming to terms with his feelings for her and rewriting one of my favorite and most intense scenes from the show (that my mother somehow forgot existed until we were rewatching the first season).

Side note: I know my update schedule is infrequent. I know this story is going off on a million tangents. But I promise that this story will be finished before season 3 arrives. That is my goal—to finish this bitch (and two other bitches) before July 4. Even if

I get side-tracked when season 4 of *Camp Camp* gets here in June, I will finish this shit.

So long and thanks for all the fish!

6. Why She Loves Him

Last chapter was Mike coming to terms. This time it's El's turn.

She supposed she'd always known, deep down, that she had a crush on Mike.

It wasn't a big revelation to her the day she figured it out. He was her best friend and the person she'd spent more time with than anybody else. Mike was smart and funny and really cute with his floppy black hair and his millions of freckles that she liked to find patterns in while he was busy being Dungeon Master during a campaign. When he smiled at her, her insides felt like they were melting and she got weak in the knees.

Of course, when she'd figured it out, she'd only been nine years old. It was shortly after her dad came back and she saw him and her mom interacting. She could see so much of her and Mike in her parents and it had just clicked in her mind that they could end up like that one day. And she *wanted that*. She wanted to stay with Mike forever and be happy like her mom and dad. Terry and Andrew were the goal in her eyes. Despite not having much in the way of money, their home was full of love and affection and laughter.

It was after that she sought out Nancy's advice on how to deal with her crush.

"You know, when you and Mike were really little, I used to tell you stories all the time."

"Yeah, I remember."

"Well, I remember after this one story, you swore up and down that Mike was your true love and he completely agreed with you."

"So... he feels the same way?"

"I honestly don't know yet. Besides, you're only nine. You don't need to worry about love and crushes and dating right now. Enjoy being a

kid."

And that advice was what stuck in El's head. Don't worry about it. Don't tell him how you feel right now. Just wait until you're ready.

But I'm ready...

So now she was stuck in a perpetual state of *do I tell him* and *does he like me*. She'd been stuck there for three years. But she was a patient girl. She was willing to wait until she had a signal of any kind.

Then he jumped off a cliff. She acted on instinct when she levitated him back to the top and when she berated him afterwards. But he'd held her as she cried and apologized for what he'd done. And she knew that she couldn't hide it forever. She needed to tell him... something. Anything to get it off her chest. Because real life didn't wait for you to make a decision. You could lose everything at a moment's notice or everything could change in an instant.

Like, for example, her parents finally getting married.

The day arrived and El was excited. Her mom and dad were finally getting their fairy-tale wedding and making it official and they were having a simple ceremony to do it. Not a courthouse wedding but something akin to it. All their friends were invited—including a few people who Terry introduced to El as having also been experimented on at the lab. One of them, a mechanic named Alice, jumped a foot when she saw El but relaxed after a moment of confused staring from the twelve-year-old.

Okay, then...?

The ceremony itself was beautiful, but El started to fantasize as she tuned out the officiant.

Suddenly it wasn't her parents standing there; it was her and Mike. He was tall and wearing a tuxedo and she wore a white dress and they were much older. But they were the ones getting married. And she wanted that. She wanted it *bad*. She wanted to marry Mike and that thought scared her because she was only *twelve*, for Christ's sake! She shouldn't be thinking about marriage at that age! At least, that's

what her mind said. Her heart said 'yes. Definitely. Absolutely. You are going to marry Mike Wheeler and that's that.'

She almost missed her parents' first kiss as a married couple. Almost.

Andrew Rich was now Andrew Ives.

The reception was held between the Wheeler and Ives houses, since they were so close, and El was ecstatic. Also nervous because of what she'd realized that day. But mostly ecstatic. Mike was wearing a formal outfit that his mom had forced him into—something El knew he hated. El herself was feeling particularly pretty in her pale pink dress that flared out at the waist and ended at her knees. And that feeling was giving her confidence.

I'm going to tell him. I'm going to tell him today.

While everyone else was distracted with the arrival of the cake, El dragged Mike off to the blanket fort they'd recently built in the basement. She could remember childhood days they'd spent in there, not a care in the world as they talked about whatever it was they'd talked about before *Star Wars* and D&D. Probably cartoons? But that didn't matter. What mattered was that this was their safe haven at the Wheeler house, the place where they could be together, just the two of them. And that was why she'd brought him down there.

"So, how's it feel to have your parents be married now?" Mike asked.

"Awesome, actually. Dad said he's shocked Mom said yes because he's such a nerd."

"What's wrong with nerds?"

"I *know*! I like nerds. I *am* a nerd. I blame him and you."

"Hey!"

"Aw..." She hugged him. "You're the best friend I could ask for!"

"El, are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She smiled. "I'm just... happy."

"Well, if you're happy, I'm happy."

This is it, El. Say it. Say the words. Say. The. Words.

"I like your freckles!" she blurted.

Nice. Nice, mouth. Hey, spit out my foot while you're at it!

"What?"

"I-I mean, you look really nice!"

"No, what was that about my freckles?"

"I think your freckles are cute...?" She chuckled nervously.

"Wow, really?" His cheeks turned pink as he smiled bashfully.

Okay. Better. Better. Now, ease into it...

"I've... always liked them. Mine only come out when it's super sunny. You have yours all the time."

Word vomit is Mike's thing, darling. Don't do it.

"That's nice of you to say. I really like your curls."

"Yeah. I remember when we were little and you used to play with my hair all the time because you thought it was pretty."

"It still is, but it'd be weird if I did that now."

Opening. Go.

"I don't think it'd be weird. I'd like it."

Okay, no. Not like that.

"You would?"

"Yeah. Because... because..."

Darling, you've shot yourself in the foot. Just do something stupid and

walk away.

She quickly leaned forward and pressed her lips against his. Warmth spread through her body at the contact and it felt like fireworks were going off in her brain. Just as quickly, she pulled away to find him staring at her, red-faced and shocked.

Yep. You did something stupid, El. Time to walk away.

"I like you!" she blurted. "I... I really like you. And I don't want things to be awkward if you don't feel the same way, so you don't have to—"

Mike suddenly kissed her again and she was cut off with a squeak. Her brain ceased to function normally as the fireworks returned and she kissed him back. They broke apart and he smiled.

"I really like you, too. I just didn't know how to say it."

"Oh my God. Are you *serious*?"

"Yeah. Dustin's been all over me about telling you."

"Not surprised. He's been the same way towards me."

They laughed and El pecked Mike on the cheek.

"So... what now?"

"Well, I guess we're not just best friends anymore. If you wanna be my girlfriend, that is...?"

"Yes. Definitely. Absolutely."

"El! Mike! Are you down here?!"

Will came down the stairs and spotted them. Mike's arms were around El and she was leaning against him.

"Am... I interrupting something?"

"No!" they both answered quickly.

"I am. Okay, Mike, your mom sent me to get you guys because Mr.

and Mrs. Ives are about to cut the cake and you two shouldn't miss it. Hurry up!"

El and Mike looked at each other as Will left and scrambled to their feet, heading out to the reception hand-in-hand.

Shorter than Mike's chapter but still pretty good, I think.

Yeah, this isn't going to be a long story. I think Max will arrive next time and we'll start expanding the dating aspect of their relationship.

BUT YAY DEVELOPMENT!

So long and thanks for all the fish!

7. Welcome Zoomer

Max felt apprehensive about her new school.

She'd never been the 'new kid' before and the kids at Hawkins Middle just whispered as she passed by them on her way to her science class. What made it worse was that it was only a couple days before Halloween, meaning she was starting in the middle of the semester. That was *awkward*. And as soon as she walked into her science class, the teacher introduced her as 'Maxine' instead of Max, and a group of four boys looked over at her with a weird expression of interest. Well, three of the four did. The fourth one was looking depressed and annoyed.

Thankfully, she didn't have to deal with them because a group of girls invited her to sit with them at lunch. She quickly realized it was for two reasons: one, she was from California, and two, they wanted to warn her away from various other students that they saw as lowly and far beneath their superior selves.

"The top group you want to avoid is the A/V club," stated Stacey, flipping her hair over her shoulder. "Most of them, anyway. The president's okay."

"You're just saying that because you think he's kind of cute," giggled Jennifer.

"So? You think Will Byers is cute."

"He is. And he's an artist."

"Who are the members of the A/V club?" Max asked.

"Well, the president is Mike Wheeler. He's tall and gangly with dark hair and cheekbones that could cut glass," explained Stacey. "Then there's the vice president, Lucas Sinclair. He's like, the *one* black kid in our grade. The secretary is Will Byers—reddish-brown hair in a bowl cut. Next is Dustin Henderson, the treasurer. He's got curly hair and he's always wearing a stupid hat."

"Is there anybody else?"

"Yeah—Jane Ives. Avoid *her* at all costs. She's, like, *actually* dangerous."

"How so?"

"She broke Troy Harrington's arm last year. Without even *touching* him. I asked my mom about it and she told me that Jane's mom, like, *sued* the government lab that used to be run out in the woods because they took Jane away from her. She's a freak and she's in the A/V club, too."

"And she's Mike Wheeler's girlfriend," chimed in Jennifer.

"Okay, if she's such a *freak*, then how does she still go here and have a boyfriend?"

"She never actually does anything at school. And she and Mike have known each other since before we all started kindergarten. I sat at the same table as them back then and they were inseparable."

Rather than being afraid of Jane Ives, Max was intrigued. A former test subject who could break somebody's arm without touching them? How *cool* was that? She made up her mind that she was going to meet this girl, one way or another. Her key was the boys. One of them would surely let her meet their sole female member. The only problem was Billy—he'd never let her hang out with those kinds of people. He'd police her and be his typical douchebag asshole self.

I can make friends. I can do it.

The next day, she entered the science classroom and noticed that the guy who'd looked depressed the day before—*Mike*, she noted mentally—was in a much better mood and talking to the extremely pretty girl next to him. She had light brown hair that curled gently, held away from her face with a pale pink headband. Unlike most of the other girls in their class, she wore overalls and a white shirt with an oversized jacket that hung over the back of her chair. Well, at least it was oversized on her tiny frame; it wouldn't have looked oversized on Mike.

So that's Jane. How the hell did she and Captain Nerd happen?

"That's the new girl, Max," she heard one of the boys who'd been staring at her prior say to Jane. Dustin, she guessed, based off his curly hair. "I was thinking we'd invite her to hang out with us on Halloween."

"But we already have a group costume!" hissed Mike.

"Mike, it's fine," Jane said. Even her voice was soft and gentle.

Somebody explain to me how this girl is dangerous again.

"You're really okay with someone new joining us?"

"It might be nice to have another girl in the group. Please?"

"Okay."

Oh, Jesus, this boy has it bad. What his girl says goes.

"I'll ask her later," Dustin stated brightly, smiling.

"Aren't you more concerned with figuring out who beat your score on Dig Dug?" Jane asked him in a teasing voice.

"I think she is Mad Max. I can ask her that, too."

After class, while she was at her locker, Max was approached by Dustin and Lucas.

"Hey, Max," Dustin chuckled lightly. "Um... I'm Dustin, and this is Lucas. We were wondering if you wanted to maybe hang out with us at the arcade later?"

"Sure, I'm game." Max smirked. "I heard you talking to your friends in class. Just for reference, I *am* Mad Max."

"Awesome. We'll meet you at the bike rack—"

"Um, actually, how about we meet at the arcade? My brother drives me around and he's going to drive me to the arcade."

"Okay, that's fine," Lucas agreed. "We'll meet you there."

It had been two weeks since Halloween and Max had spent all that time getting to know the members of the A/V club. None of them were quite as lame as the popular girls had made them out to be; in fact, they were passionate about what they loved in a way that Max wasn't used to. Jane (or El, as she insisted on being called) was probably one of the sweetest people she'd ever met. In all honesty, Max was having trouble believing that El could've ever broken anybody's arm.

That is, until she was invited out to the junkyard the week after Thanksgiving.

"What are we doing here?" she asked.

"Do you accept your status as a member of our party?" Dustin inquired.

"Yeah, of course."

"Then the three rules of law must be accepted: shake hands if you draw first blood, friends don't lie, and if a party member requires assistance it is our duty to provide that assistance."

"I accept all three of those rules."

"I still need confirmation she can be trusted," protested Mike.

"Mike." El's voice had a tone of warning and her boyfriend backed down.

"Max Mayfield, we hereby welcome you to the Party," declared Lucas. "As such, there is a secret that you must know."

What is going on?

"Watch," El told her, holding up a hand. Max followed to where El was pointing... and watched as an old tire began to rise off the ground.

"Whoa. What. No, what the hell?!" The tire dropped.

"I have psychokinesis."

"Don't you mean telekinesis?"

"They're the same thing. You've... probably heard about how I broke Troy's arm last year."

"Yeah?"

"That's how."

"To be fair, he made Mike jump off a cliff before she did it," pointed out Dustin. "He would've died if El hadn't brought him back to safety."

El then rolled up her left sleeve to reveal a *011* tattooed on her forearm.

"I was stolen from my mom when I was born and raised in the Hawkins National Lab until I was four. That's when she got me out and we met Mike's family."

"Why did they take you from your parents?"

"Because of her powers!" interrupted Dustin. "Seriously, she's like an even more badass Jean Gray!"

"Dustin..." El looked somewhat bashful at the praise.

"So the lab took you away from your mom and forced you to be a lab rat because you have psychokinesis. That's fucked up."

"I've moved past it. I barely remember being in the lab. My earliest memories are of Mike and living here instead of there. My question is if you can handle knowing the truth about me and still being my friend at the same time. I've never had a female friend before—at least, not one my own age who sticks around and knows about the lab. It's just been the five of us since fourth grade."

Max was speechless for a moment.

Never had a female friend that sticks around...? Bitches...

Jane Ives. Avoid her at all costs. She's dangerous.

She broke Troy Harrington's arm last year.

She's not dangerous. She's protective. And I know she'll defend me to hell and back.

I'd do the same for her.

"So. Are you in or out?"

"In. I'm definitely in."

"Well, then, Zoomer Max—welcome to the Party."

Like I said, this story isn't going to be a long one. I hit a wall on this chapter that took me a bit to break through and this chapter isn't too long. But the high school shit's coming up and I know you all wanna see it.

So long and thanks for all the fish!